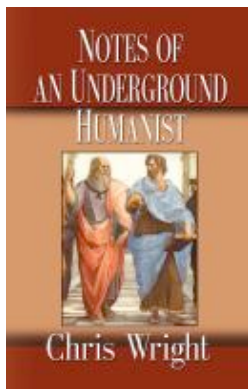


# NOTES OF AN UNDERGROUND HUMANIST



Chris Wright



*"Humanism" has been driven underground--by corporate capitalism. This book represents an attempt to resurrect it.*

## **Notes of an Underground Humanist**

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Second Edition

## Preface to the Second Edition

The world has changed since 2007, when I wrote the preface to the first edition of this book. That was still the age of capitalist triumphalism, of glacial politics in the U.S. and the Despair of the Activist. Cultural ennui—personal ennui for me. Aimlessness. Since 2008, though, and especially since 2011, life has taken on a new coloring. Horizons have opened; the world is in tumult, even more than it was, and nothing seems permanent anymore. Things have continued to get worse for most people and will continue to do so for decades, but now at least in activist circles there is the sense that the old world is crumbling and a new one is beginning its laborious birth.

In other words, between 2008 and 2012 the world, particularly the West, began the long transition from an age of sick individualism to an age of healthy collectivism. Social movements began their long march back into the mainstream—social movements against *economic* injustice, the most fundamental kind of oppression. The recent evolution of economic power-structures—the institutions around which society pivots—is responsible not only for the brute material horrors of increasing class polarization and the global immizeration of billions but also for all the social atomism that has grown in the U.S. since the 1970s (or really the 1940s), the privatization of life, the human alienation, the destruction of public spaces and public discourse, the erosion of civil society so that now *churches* are practically the only functioning institutions that have some kind of positive relation to popular empowerment. Society has been gutted, because that has been in the interest of certain segments of the capitalist class. (Marx's historical materialism, in its essence, is merely common sense.) The task for *human* beings now, as opposed to the *capitalist* beings who have brought us to the brink, is to reconstitute the public, the social. That is the way to save the world. And that is what Occupy Wall Street began in the West, with its tentative moves toward remaking public spaces and reminding the U.S. of *class oppression*.

CHRIS WRIGHT

I find it a bit embarrassing now to read what I wrote in 2007, the little preface I wrote. It's too self-fixated, sickly in its self-consciousness. It, and much else I wrote in my twenties, belongs to the postmodern era, the era of individualistic existential anxiety and hyper self-consciousness, of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Infinite Jest* and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, etc. However great these and other such artworks are, they are symptoms of a diseased society, as acute and alienated self-consciousness always is. Expressions of cultural decadence grounded in "bourgeois" social atomization. Products of the "reification" of life, in Marxian jargon. I knew this; I knew it was true of most twentieth-century art in general: I had read my Georg Lukács (*Realism in Our Time*, for instance, published in 1964) and absorbed the Marxian, humanistic critique of bourgeois culture. In fact, I had always despised postmodernism, especially its theoretical manifestations. Some healthy instinct of self-defense had made me innately suspicious of all things postmodern—indeed, all things post-nineteenth century. Nevertheless, my cultural embeddedness and immaturity ensured that the first instantiation of this book didn't live up to its (rather ponderous) title.

Hopefully this edition is more satisfying. I have tried to edit out whatever narcissism and traces of cultural decadence tainted the first version, and I've nearly tripled the book's length. Most of it still consists of stuff written in my twenties, but this time I've made the selections (from my journal) more judiciously and added much more material on history and capitalism, in honor of the times. As before, the thread that hopefully ties the whole gallimaufry together is the admittedly nebulous one of "humanism," which can take the many forms, negative and positive, it assumes in this book. What I mean by humanism is what I meant in 2007: authenticity, integrity, the celebration of creativity and individuality, freedom, truth, beauty, love, compassion, resistance to dehumanization—all those quaint traditional values that have for millennia, but more dramatically in recent centuries, been fighting a war against the anti-human practices of "civilization." The victories of Occupy Wall Street

NOTES OF AN UNDERGROUND HUMANIST

belonged to humanism, as did its defeats; labor movements and peasant uprisings and slave rebellions from time immemorial have been arrayed in the battlefield alongside humanism. Power-structures have always fought savagely against humanism, warring to suppress freedom and popular self-determination. And the individual set against his society, persecuted by the elite mob, has been a lone warrior on behalf of the human.

The reader will notice, therefore, that this book isn't academic, nor does it evince respect for institutional conventions of any sort. Institutions are indeed, perhaps, what I dislike most in the world (however necessary they are in some form). Nearly all the barbarous inhumanity that confronts us daily is explained by the workings of impersonal institutions, bureaucracies and the principle of *authority*. When the police viciously destroy spontaneous communities that arise in moments of disaster, as after Hurricane Katrina, that is institutional authority at work, not some supposedly innate human instinct of destructiveness (Freud's "death instinct" or whatever you want to call it). In fact, such brutal destruction of community is an apt symbol of bureaucracy itself—as well as its capitalist parents, marketization, commoditization, and "privatization"—which, like its perfection totalitarianism, functions by disrupting human interactions, natural human responses, thus atomizing people, making possible the amoral world we see today. The bureaucratization and commoditization of everything are the twin evils of the age, the overarching evils of modern capitalism.

In more insidious ways too, though, the "institutionalization" of society is detestable. It means groupthink and conformism, disregard of originality and genuine merit, hostility toward individuality, the fetishizing of superficial "success"—accolades, credentials—as determined by the interests of institutions and ultimately the imperative to perpetuate established power-structures. The mediocre and dishonest is often celebrated (is *allowed* to be celebrated) because it rarely challenges social structures and, partly for that reason, tends to sell well. Other things being equal, I'm inclined to respect someone less the higher he has risen in society or the more recognition he has, because of what his

CHRIS WRIGHT

success suggests about him. There are many honorable exceptions, people like Naomi Klein, Howard Zinn, and Amy Goodman, who confront the dominant institutions head-on in their mission to expose injustice and hypocrisy—and their success shows just how thirsty the public is for *honesty* in political discourse. But far more symptomatic are the hordes of conforming intellectuals in elite universities, policy institutes, the mainstream media, law firms, neoliberal organizations such as the IMF, government institutions, and corporations. The “institutional” mentality—the greatest threat to humanism, indeed to the survival of the species—is on subtle display, for example, in the response one professor gave to my praising Noam Chomsky: he curtly dismissed him with the smug assertion that “he lacks academic bona fides.” In other words, “he’s not ‘one of us,’” so we can ignore him (as nearly all academics do, despite the wealth of information he provides from every conceivable source). A little statement like that, as innocuous as it may seem, is the beginning of inhumanity: it signifies the elevation of institutional norms, a tribal mentality, at the expense of human values and fundamental truths, such as Chomsky serves in his work. The truly bureaucratic mentality that worships institutional authority and *rules* isn’t far off; and the Adolf Eichmann phenomenon, the banal bureaucrat filing papers that make possible the deaths of millions, isn’t far off from that. —Again, it’s the horrible capitalism-spawned *atomism* of modernity.

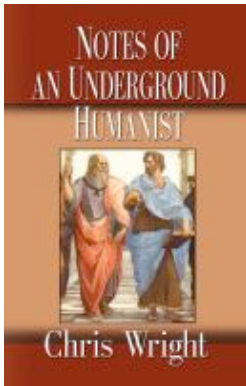
I’ll return to all this later in the book. At the moment I just want to frame what follows. I expect that almost everyone will find something to like and many things to dislike in this work, for it flouts most cultural and political mores that prevail in the West. Everything from philosophy and psychology to history and sociology to poetry and artistic criticism is represented here. There are short academic essays I’ve written because they relate to my broader concerns, and there are even summaries of books that have struck my fancy. I include these because it seems to me that, at this point in history, honest intellectuals have an obligation to disseminate as much information as they can to the public, to “educate the masses” on the pressing issues of the day. There is an



*NOTES OF AN UNDERGROUND HUMANIST*

incredible amount of good scholarship out there, but only a small proportion of the world has easy access to it. It is the task of those of us who do have easy access to break out of the academic bubble, collect and summarize the best scholarship—start a conversation with the millions who matter, and in the process be educated ourselves.

Considering the state of the world, it is easy to be discouraged. And this book gives ample expression to that inevitable human emotion. But in the end, to waste away in discouragement is a *choice*, not the only rational response to the way things are. In moments of hopelessness or disgust with the world I try to think of people like Malalai Joya, the heroic Afghan activist for peace and women's rights. If she can rise above cynicism, then so can I. We should follow her example and fight to “humanize” society, rebel against pernicious authority and every shibboleth that justifies inaction. Hopefully this book makes some small contribution to that collective project.



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